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SUBJECT: MOROCCO HOSTS MEPI LDF ALUMNI CONFERENCE

Summary:

¶1. (SBU) The second annual Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship (LDF) Alumni Meeting took place in Marrakech, Morocco December 15-17. The DCM opened the event that brought together 28 LDF alumni from 13 countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Most participants felt that U.S. foreign policy in the region would remain the same and that the new administration would focus its attention on U.S. domestic issues. Iran also figured prominently, with participants questioning the role Russia would play in the region and Saudi Arabia and Turkey's reactions to Iran's possibly becoming a nuclear power. End summary.

DCM Jackson Opens Event

¶2. (SBU) On December 15, Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) Robert Jackson opened the second annual LDF Alumni Meeting, co-sponsored by MEPI and Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, with a speech on the state of MEPI's four pillars: democracy, economic development, education, and women's empowerment. Twenty-eight participants representing 13 countries were present for the three-day event. This year's LDF Alumni Meeting brought together participants from Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, and the West Bank.

Purpose of the LDF Program and Alumni Conference

¶3. (SBU) The LDF program annually brings 20-25 persons from across the Middle East and North Africa to the United States for a three-month program that combines academic coursework at Syracuse University and an internship experience at a public institution in Washington DC. The program is administered by the Maxwell School of Syracuse University in close collaboration with MEPI program staff. The third class of LDF participants are in the process of receiving invitations and beginning their visa application process to begin in March 2009. Morocco will have two participants in the 2009 LDF class, including the first Saharawi representative in the program.

¶4. (SBU) This conference provided an opportunity for alumni across the MENA region to reunite with classmates and to get acquainted with participants from different years. The intentions of the alumni meeting were to facilitate a bonding experience among the group and to have substantive discussions about democracy in the Middle East and the potential impact of a new administration on U.S. Middle East policy as well as to provide an opportunity for participants to learn more about MEPI initiatives and ways in which to network with other MEPI programs in the region.

Pessimistic View of Obama's Impact on MENA Policy

15. (SBU) One of the most interesting discussions among the group occurred during the second day of the conference when Syracuse University LDF Director Steve Lux conducted an unscientific poll among the participants on the impact of the Obama administration on U.S. Middle East policy. Sixty-nine percent of the participants said that their respective governments were undecided about whether or not they were happy that Obama will be the next U.S. president. One hundred percent of the participants claimed that the citizens of their countries were happy to see Obama win the election. However, 63 percent of those polled felt that the Obama administration would not have a positive impact on MENA policy. Most participants felt that U.S. Foreign Policy in the region would remain the same and that the new administration would focus its attention on U.S. domestic issues such as the economic crisis and healthcare.

Iran Dominates Q/A Time

16. (SBU) During one of the Question and Answer sessions, Iran dominated the conversation. Participants questioned the role Russia would play in the region and the reactions of Saudi Arabia and Turkey if Iran became a nuclear power. There was concern that a U.S. agreement to negotiate with Iran would make the Iranian government become more arrogant and some suggested that it would be better for Obama to wait until after the 2009 Iranian elections to begin bi-lateral discussions.

Comment

17. (SBU) The Mission values the efforts of the LDF program and sees value in bringing together young, democratic reformers from throughout the region. While there was some substantive dialogue during the alumni conference, the Mission urges that the model used for other MEPI alumni events be used for the next LDF meeting, i.e., a detailed agenda with more interactive workshops coordinated in partnership with the host embassy. End Comment.

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Riley